

AN AMERICAN INDIAN RELIGION
THE IROQUOIS

A Term Paper
Presented to
the Faculty of the United States Army
Chaplains School

Effective Writing Course

by
Oscar H. Barrow, Jr.
December 3, 1973

001

COPIES - 70000000

SAVING

(10000)

(10000000)

10000000

CONTENTS

I. ORGANIZATION OF THE IROQUOIS RELIGION	1
II. IROQUOIS THEOLOGY	2
III. FESTIVALS OF THE IROQUOIS	5
IV. SIGNIFICANCE OF DREAMS	7
V. MARRIAGE	9
VI. FUNERAL CUSTOMS	10
VII. AN IROQUOIS PRAYER	12
VIII. THE RELIGION OF HANDSOME LAKE	13
IX. BIBLIOGRAPHY	15

I. ORGANIZATION OF THE IROQUOIS RELIGION

The religious life among the Iroquois Indians was highly organized and included a priesthood of three men and three women, who were known as "Keepers of the Faith." They were responsible for the supervision of religious ceremonies and various secret societies that performed curing and other ceremonies. Each society had its own officers, masks, songs, dances and rituals. The Indians believed that all life was joined spiritually with the objects and forces of nature. The orenda, or a man's own inner spiritual power, combated and resisted the powers of harm and evil. Even though each man's own orenda might be small, it was joined by all the orendas within the fire-side or ohwachiras and clans. Thus united it became a strong and powerful spirit. When a man died or was killed, the loss of his orenda reduced those of all the others of which it had been a part. To compensate for this, prisoners were often adopted into ohwachiras and tribes.¹

¹Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., The Indian Heritage of North America (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Press, 1968), pp. 95-96.

II. IROQUOIS THEOLOGY

The Iroquois believed in one God - Ha-wen-ne-ju - the Great ruler, and ascribed to him all good. They also believed in the Evil one, who was similar to the devil of the Bible, as they believed he was ever going about doing evil. They also believed the devil to possess creative powers, saying that as God created man and all useful animals, so the evil-minded one created all monsters, noxious reptiles and poisonous plants.

The Iroquois believed in a state of future rewards and punishments, where the good would be separated from the bad; but they did not descend into the depths of the heart to find sin, or trouble themselves about the motives of actions. Their code of morality, as well as religious creed, was very simple; but all that it required they performed.²

The Iroquois believed that the Great Spirit had creative power. He created not only the animal and vegetable world, but also adapted the elements, and the whole visible universe to the wants of man. In the existence of the Great Spirit, an invisible but ever present diety, the

² Minnie Myrtle, The Iroquois: The Bright Side of Indian Character (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1855), pp. 45-46.

Iroquois believed. They believed that the Great Spirit ruled and administered the world and the affairs of the red race. They looked to him as the author of their being, the source of their temporal blessings, and the future dispenser of the felicities of their heavenly home. To him they rendered constant thanks and homage for the changes in the seasons, the fruits of the earth, the preservation of their lives, and for their social privileges, and political prosperity; and to him they addressed their prayers for the continuance of his protecting care.³

The Iroquois also believed in the immortality of the soul. The happy home beyond the setting sun had cheered the heart and lighted the expiring eye of the Indian long before Columbus came to America. This truth has always been taught among the Iroquois as a fundamental article of faith.⁴

Before each of their religious festivals, there is made a general and public confession of sin, which appears to be the result of Jesuit missionary influence. Several days before the time designated for the festival, the people assemble by appointment, and each one in turn, who has a confession to make, rising and taking a string of white wampum in his hand, acknowledges his faults and transgressions, and publicly professes a purpose of amendment. The white

³ Lewis Henry Morgan, League of the Iroquois, (New York: Corinth Book, 1962), pp. 153-55.

⁴ Ibid.

wampum is the emblem of purity and sincerity. With it he confirms and records his words. This has no reference to the absolution of forgiveness of sins, but related to future conduct only.⁵

⁵Ibid., p. 170.

III. FESTIVALS OF THE IROQUOIS

There are six regular festivals of the Iroquois:

1. Maple Festival. The primary idea of this was to return thanks to the maple itself, but also to the Great Spirit for the gift of the maple. It lasted one day.
2. Planting Festival. This was designed as an invocation to the Great Spirit to bless the seed, and lasted one day. It served also as a means of rendering thanks to the Great Spirit for the coming of Spring and the return of the planting time.
3. Berry Festival. The strawberry was the first fruit of the season, and this festival served as a reminder of the blessings from the Great Spirit and his providential care.
4. Green Corn Festival. When the green corn became fit for use, it signified the beginning of the season of plenty. The festival lasted four days. Corn was the staple Indian food, along with beans and squash. These three plants are all mentioned under the figurative name, "Our Life" or "Our Supporters." It was a festival of thanksgiving, and a time for speeches and a time of prayer.
5. Harvest Festival. Nature having matured and poured forth her stores for their sustenance, the ceremonial was instituted as a perpetual acknowledgement of their gratitude for each returning harvest. This festival of general thanksgiving lasted four days.
6. New Year's Jubilee. The Indian name given this festival literally signifies "The Most Excellent Faith" or "The Supreme Belief." The festival lasted seven days, and the most significant event was the

burning of the white dog on the fifth day of the festival. The white dog signified purity, and the simple idea of the sacrifice was to send up the spirit of the dog as a messenger to the Great Spirit, to announce their continued fidelity to his service, and, also, to convey to him their united thanks for the blessings of the year.⁶

⁶Ibid., pp. 187-217.

IV. SIGNIFICANCE OF DREAMS

The Iroquois have placed much value on dreams, looking to their dreams for guidance in all the important affairs of life. When they had a dream, they sought to honor that dream the next day (e.g., one who dreamed of taking a bath would run out first thing the next day, still naked, and throw water upon himself).

The Iroquois theory of dreams was basically psycho-analytic. The Jesuit priest to the Iroquois in 1649 described the theory as follows: "In addition to the desires which we generally have that are free, or at least voluntary in us, ...the Hurons believe that our souls have other desires, which are inborn and concealed. These, they say, come from the depths of the soul, not through any knowledge, but by means of a certain blind transporting of the soul to certain objects...Now they believe that our soul makes these natural desires known by means of dreams, which are its language. Accordingly, where these desires are accomplished, it is satisfied, but on the contrary, if it be not granted what it desires, it becomes angry, and not only does not give its body the good and happiness that it wished to procure for it, but often revolts against the body, causing various diseases, and even death...

In consequence of these erroneous ideas, most of the Iroquois are very careful to rate their dreams, and to provide the soul with what it has pictured to them during their sleep. They call this ondinnonk - a secret desire of the soul manifested by a dream."⁷

⁷Anthony F. C. Wallace, The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Press, 1970), pp. 59-61.

V. MARRIAGE

Exclusive monogamy was the rule of marriage among the Iroquois. Matrilineal descent and matrilocal residence were coupled with female ownership and control of agricultural land and houses, not to mention the unusual authority of women in political affairs. Among the Iroquois the men literally moved in with their wives, who could divorce them merely by tossing their personal belongings out of the door of the longhouse. Because of these conditions, polygamy (the marriage of one husband to two or more wives), which was very common among many Indian tribes, was not practiced among the Iroquois.⁸

⁸Harold E. Driver, Indians of North America (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 230-31.

VI. FUNERAL CUSTOMS

At one period of time the Iroquois buried their dead in a sitting position facing to the east.⁹

Another mode was to lay the body exposed upon a bark scaffolding, erected upon poles, or secured upon the limbs of trees, where it was left to waste to a skeleton. In this manner the skeletons of the whole family were preserved from generation to generation by the filial or parental affection of the living. After a number of years, the skeletons were collected and placed in a common resting place.¹⁰

The Iroquois believed that the grief of the living added to the sorrows of the dead. The period of grieving was to be no more than ten days. They were taught that when they lost one of their number, they were to bury their grief in the grave of the departed one. It was taught that when ten days had elapsed, a feast was to be prepared and that the soul of the dead would return and partake of it with the living. They were to wear their finest clothing

⁹Morgan, League of the Iroquois, p. 172.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 173.

to the funeral. They believed that the dead had intelligence and knew what transpired about them.¹¹

¹¹ Arthur C. Parker, Parker on the Iroquois (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1968), p. 57.

VII. AN IROQUOIS PRAYER

One of the Iroquois prayers is not only Christian in feeling but is astonishingly like the "Hymn in Praise of All Created Things," written by Saint Francis of Assisi.

A part of that Iroquois prayer is quoted below:

Hail! Hail! Hail! Thou who hast created all things, who rulest all things, listen to our words ...Give to the keepers of the faith wisdom to execute properly thy command...We return thanks to our mother, the earth, which sustains us, that she has been caused to yield so plantifully of her fruits ...We return thanks to all the herbs and plants of the earth; we thank them for giving us strength to preserve our bodies in health and for curing us of the diseases inflicted upon us by evil spirits. We return thanks to the Three Sisters, the main sustainers of our lives. We return thanks to the bushes and the trees; we thank the winds that banish disease as they move. We thank the thunderbirds who give us happiness and comfort by having the rain descend on the earth, causing all plants to grow. We thank the moon and the stars and the sun. May the latter never hide his face from us in shame and leave us in darkness...¹²

¹²Elizabeth Baity Chesley, Americans Before Columbus (New York: The Viking Press, 1964), pp. 142-43.

VIII. THE RELIGION OF HANDSOME LAKE

The Religion of Handsome Lake had its beginning in 1799 when Handsome Lake had a vision of being visited by angels with a message from the Creator. Handsome Lake was to tell the people the Creator was angry because of four great sins - whiskey, witchcraft, love magic and abortion, and sterility medicine. The guilty must repent and do them no more.¹³

Handsome Lake had two more visions, in August of 1799 and February 1800. It was upon the three visions that the religion of Handsome Lake was established. The first gospel was apocalyptic and contained three major themes: (1) the imminence of world destruction, (2) the definition of sin, (3) the prescription for salvation.

Beginning in the Fall of 1801 and continuing until his death in 1815, Handsome Lake presented a second gospel, which emphasized the value in daily life of temperance, peace, land retention, acculturation and domestic morality.¹⁴ He taught a strict principle of sanctity in the

¹³Wallace, The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca, p. 241.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 263.

husband-wife relationship, a relationship that took precedence over all other kinship ties.

Temperance was emphasized very strongly by Handsome Lake, and by 1806 the Senecas had become known for their sobriety. Though the sale and use of liquor among the Indians was never fully eliminated, it was strongly condemned, and those who did use it were looked down upon.

The form of Handsome Lake Church was set in about 1850. What was considered radical in the prophet's day is now, one-hundred and fifty years later, the extreme of traditionalism. Being a follower of Handsome Lake today is an expression of a somewhat nostalgic and deeply emotional identification with Indianess itself.¹⁵

Things have changed along the allegheny. The people have moved away to prefabricated bungalows on higher ground. No longer do the flies buzz in the long grass down on the floats, or the elms and walnut trees wave softly in the wind that flows gently down from the hills. But the words of Handsome Lake still resound in the longhouses, for as the prophet said, "Gaiwiio is only in its beginning."¹⁶

¹⁵Ibid., p. 336.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 337.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Chesley, Elizabeth Baity. Americans Before Columbus. New York: The Viking Press, 1964.
- Driver, Harold E. Indians of North America. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961.
- Josephy, Alvin M., Jr., The Indian Heritage of North America. New York: Alfred A. Knopf Press, 1968.
- Josephy, Alvin M., Jr. Red Power. New York: American Heritage Press, 1971.
- Morgan, Lewis Henry. League of the Iroquois. New York: Corinth Book, 1962.
- Myrtle, Minnie. The Iroquois: The Bright Side of Indian Character. New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1855.
- Parker, Arthur C. Parker on the Iroquois. Edited by William M. Fenton, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1968.
- Perlin, Ms., private interview held at Wagner College, Staten Island, N. Y., October 24, 1973.
- Wallace, Anthony F. C. The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca. New York: Alfred F. Knopf, 1970.

